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ABSTRACT

This paper is a review of literature on tracking, a controversial educational practice. In this report, tracking means the use of separate classes and/or whole curriculum sequences for students considered to be of different ability levels. The trend in recent research is to find that tracking benefits only the gifted, or high track, students. Low track classes receive less teacher time and enthusiasm, less imaginative, effective instruction, and less homework. Low track placement definitely correlates to minority background and/or low socioeconomic status. Once in a low track, students rarely switch track after grade three. Schools do not help them to move into a higher track. By the end of the primary grades students are set into rigid ability tracks correlating to their race and socioeconomic status. The effects last even longer than the school years. Some new research hints that the problem may not be the tracking structure itself, but how individuals use it and react to it. (JAZ)

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Administrative Report

UPDATE ON TRACKING AND ABILITY GROUPING

by

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This report is a review of the literature on a current educational topic. It is intended to be an unbaised summary and does not necessarily reflect the positions or opinions of the San Mateo County Office of Education or its staff.

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Tracking and ability grouping are very common practices in American schools: 77% use them with the rationale that they make for easier teaching and better attention to individual student abilities.[1] Yet recently tracking has been condemned as an educational practice by such organizations as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Why is it now being attacked?

Before addressing this question, we should distinguish tracking as a subset of ability grouping. In this report, tracking means the use of separate classes and/or whole curriculum sequences for students considered to be of different ability levels. This occurs most commonly in secondary schools, which usually have two or three tracks for low, middle, and high ability students under a variety of names, such as General and College Prep or Remedial, General, and Advanced. Ability grouping is a more general concept which includes temporary within-class instructional groupings, like first grade reading groups. There is some evidence[2] that casual within-class groupings need not affect students so greatly as does the formalized system of different curriculum tracks, which receives the severest condemnation in current literature.

This condemnation of so popular an educational practice results both from major research findings and from a change in the educational philosophy used to interpret those findings. The trend in recent research is to find that tracking benefits only the gifted or high track student.[3] Both high and low ability students do better in a high track classroom.[4] Low track classrooms have been found to have a less productive learning environment: students pay less attention,

there are more managment problems, and the peer group tends to undermine rather than support efforts at learning.[5] This brings up a "chicken or egg" question: are lower track students inherently harder to teach because they pay less attention or is their poorer classroom behavior a result of how they are treated in the low track classroom?

A significant finding of recent educational research, highlighted in John Goodlad's massive A Study of Schooling and replicated in the California High School Curriculum Study: Paths Through High School, is just how differently high and low track students are treated. Essentially, tracks can signify totally separate educational experiences occuring in adjacent classrooms. It has been found that--compared to high and middle track classes--low track classes receive less teacher time and enthusiasm and less imaginative, effective instruction; they are assigned less homework; less emphasis is placed on higher order thinking skills; and the teacher student relationship is less friendly.[6] Teachers set lower standards for themselves and their students in low track classes and they behave with less seriousness and less care than when they are teaching high track classes.[7] Whether one chooses to consider it a cause or effect of their low track placement, low track students have been found to have lower self esteem, more misconduct, a higher dropout rate, and more delinquency.[8]

The California High School Curriculum Study concludes:

> The information collected during the study conveys a picture of students who may attend the same school but who come away with very different educational experiences. . . .The high school diploma does not represent a "core curriculum," even in the most general sense, of knowledge studied or learned. On the contrary, the education students receive is, in large part, determined by the track to which they are assigned when they enter high school. Those most gravely affected by this problem are students in the general or lower tracks of California high schools

> who present no immediate "problems" to the school. . . .These students generally study the minimum necessary to pass their proficiency exams and complete their graduation requirements. They therefore receive little attention from their counselors. Teachers assign less homework, courses cover less material, and some students may not even be allowed to take their textbooks home. For the most part, they do not progress to more advanced coursework nor do they receive extensive counseling about post-high school opportunities.[9]

John Goodlad seeks to impress us with the seriousness of these findings:

> They suggest the probability of marked inequities among students in regard to access to knowledge and pedagogical practices. Consequently, the implications of these findings may be the most significant and, perhaps, controversial of this entire report.[10]

Why should this be so serious and controversial? Because educational philosophy has moved in recent years away from "elitism" or any "separate but equal" treatment of students. Goodlad's central indictment of tracking is its inequity; today's educational reformers, such as Goodlad, Ernest Boyer, and Mortimer Adler are calling for a core curriculum that will provide a common set of skills and learnings to every student--an idea noticeable in the publication Raising Expectations: Model Graduation Requirements: Approved Unanimously by the California State Board of Education on June 10, 1983.[11]

What makes tracking even less acceptable in today's educational climate is its clear tie to social discrimination. Low track placement definitely correlates to minority background and/or low socioeconomic status. A high achieving black student is more likely to be found in a low track class than is a poorly achieving white, middle class student.[12]

And once in a low track, the student is likely to stay. The track system is not flexible. Students rarely switch tracks or their

"high," "medium," or "low" label after grade three.[13] Schools don't help them to try. The California High School Curriculum Study found that schools do not teach students the skills they would need to move into a higher track; for example, General Math does not prepare a student for upper division College Preparatory Mathematics courses.[14]

So by the end of the primary grades students are set into rigid ability tracks correlating to their race and socioeconomic status. They respond with a tendency to segregate themselves by track outside the classroom as well and to stereotype students in other tracks.[15]

The effects last even longer than the school years. "Whether a student will go on to college and what college he will attend are best predicted by the track in which he is placed, not by his ability or aptitude."[16]

The demonstrated benefits of tracking to gifted students may not be as great as assumed. A longitudinal study of tracked students in grades four through six showed that the high track students did not maintain the performance advantage they gained in the first year of grouping. Very high (and very low) scoring students showed less achievement or self concept change; ability grouping seemed to affect those near the cut-off scores most. "In short, the only winners of ability grouping appeared to be the lower students in grouped classes who were given an educational and social opportunity to be with the best."[17]

Some new research hints that the problem may not be the tracking structure itself, but how individuals use it and react to it. We know that many teachers treat high and low ability students differently, but we don't yet know why.[18] Students and teachers react upon each other in highly complex ways that research may never be able to

decipher, but three studies suggest that eliminating tracking might not automatically eliminate the "self fulfilling prophecies" it can foster.

A study of first grade reading groups found that ability groups can be used benignly. "In 'egalitarian' classrooms, where teachers appeared to de-emphasize the distinctions between reading groups, group rank had no effect on learning at any time during the year. In 'elitist' classrooms, the distinctions between groups were highly pronounced, and even with instructional content controlled, group rank had a sizeable impact on learning. That effect increased as the year went by."[19]

Another study suggests that even without tracking, high ability students forge ahead. When placed in a heterogeneous, cooperative learning situation, brighter elementary children commanded more influence and assistance than their peers, indicating a fuller learning experience. The moral seems to be that "the rich get richer" in almost any learning environment.[20]

This same conclusion might be drawn from a study by Susan Hanson. She examined the college preparatory tracks in two schools in the same district, one school in an upper middle class suburb, the other in an inner city, working class environment. She found that the two college preparatory programs differed in explicit curriculums in some cases, were paced differently in others, and delivered different messages about success and achievement to their students. High achievers in the working class school had to take more responsibility on themselves. They received more ambiguous messages about college attendance and they were given less of a dose of achievement-oriented

values and skills than were their upper middle class peers.[21]

If "egalitarian" ability groups have no detrimental effects and if differential educational messages can be given within the same track, based on social class, we might conclude that tracking is not the problem--attitudes are. Indeed, Adam Gamoran suggests idealogy may be the most important factor, but also the most controllable, and that teachers can be trained to use ability stratification without the negative affect.[22]

But Gamoran's study was of reading groups within first grade classrooms. The question remains whether the elaborate, formalized, separate-class sequences typical of secondary school tracking could likewise be made "egalitarian" by an alteration of attitudes. The current condemnation of tracking by leading authors and professional associations indicate that the answer to that question may be "no."

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